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AUTHOR	Terkla, Dawn Geronimo; Pagano, Marian F.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of a semantic differential research tool to investigate the image of Tufts University in Massachusetts. Specifically explored are the following questions: (1) What are the differences between the institution's desired image and current image? (2) Do various constituencies view the institution differently, and if so, how do alumni perceptions differ from those of current students? and (3) Does the institution's internal image differ from its external image? The paper describes the various surveys used to collect study data, including obtaining opinions from alumni, faculty and administration, college seniors, college applicants, and the current student population. Study results include the following items: elements of the desired image tended toward the extremes; perceptions differed among the various constituencies although the image held by alumni and currently enrolled students was quite similar; and most of the differences that did exist, existed between the incoming freshmen (rosier image and more positive view) and one or more of the other groups surveyed. It is noted that because incoming freshmen hold a rather different image of the school than the other groups, student retention problems may develop as these students matriculate and discover that the university is not what they expected. (GLR)

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UNDERSTANDING INSTITUTIONAL IMAGE

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Authors:
Dawn Geronimo Terkla
Director, Institutional Research & Planning
Tufts University
28 Sawyer Ave.
Medford, MA 02155
(617) 627-3274

and

Marian F. Pagano
Director, Planning & Institutional Research
Columbia University
211 Low Library
New York, NY 10027
(212) 854-2473

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UNDERSTANDING INSTITUTIONAL IMAGE

All organizations have an image. An organization's image is not a clear, concise concept; but rather a set of individual's perceptions about the institution. Market researchers argue that people's perceptions are critical to an institution's well-being (Topor, 1986). Image has an impact on a variety of aspects of the university, such as attracting new students, recruiting faculty, attracting outside funding for research and influencing the generosity of potential donors. It is in every institutions best interest to understand its image, to work on ways to improve that image, and to insure that the image reflects the current institution.

As an organization, an educational institution has a multi-faceted image that includes academic, social, political and perhaps stylistic dimensions. For example, although two institutions may be academic equivalents, a centuries old New England college may have a very different image than a west coast public university. Kotler and Fox assert that a "responsive institution has a strong interest in how its publics see the school and its programs and services, since people often respond to the institution's image, not necessarily its reality" (Kotler & Fox, 1985, page 37).

The major objectives of this paper are to discuss using the semantic differential research tool to measure one institution's image and to examine the subsequent result. We will present our findings regarding various constituencies perceptions of Tufts University [1]. Specifically, we will explore the following questions: (1) What are the differences between the institution's desired image and current image? (2) Do various constituencies view the institution differently? If so, how do alumni perceptions differ from those of current students? Does the internal image differ from the external image?

METHODOLOGY

There have been various methods proposed to measure an institution's image. We have chosen to use the semantic differential because it is a relatively flexible image-measuring tool that can provide

[1] Tufts University is a nonsectarian university with approximately 8,000 students (4,427 undergraduates and 3,250 graduate and professional students). The main campus is located in Medford and Somerville, Massachusetts; approximately five miles northwest of Boston.

information on how different constituencies view an institution (Kotler & Fox, 1985). It involves the following steps: 1) developing a set of relevant dimensions, 2) reducing the set of relevant dimensions, 3) administering the instrument to a sample of respondents, 4) averaging the results, and 5) checking the image variance. During the course of this research project we followed each of the five steps.

The data for this study were obtained from a variety of sources. Over a two year period surveys [2] were administered to various campus constituencies: accepted applicants, current students, graduating seniors, faculty, administrators, and alumni. While the primary objectives of the surveys differed, all constituents were presented with the same set of relevant dimensions [3] (see Figure 1) and asked to evaluate the institution.

Accepted Applicant Survey. In the spring of 1991, individuals who were offered admission to Tufts were queried. Matriculant and non-matriculant surveys were designed to gather the following information: (1) colleges and universities to which the applicant pool applied, (2) individual's choice preferences of specific institutions, (3) the institution's admissions decisions, (4) financial aid information, (5) the institution of matriculation, (6) the degree of influence specific individuals and institutional attributes had in the final matriculation decision, and (7) individual perceptions of Tufts. The response rates for matriculants and non-matriculants were 60% and 40%, respectively. While both matriculants and non-matriculants were asked to rate the 27 semantic differentials, only the matriculant responses are included in this analysis.

Current Student Survey. In January, 1992 a one page questionnaire consisting of items in Figure 1 was sent to 1,789 current Tufts' sophomore and juniors. They were asked to rate each of the 27 semantic differentials. The response rate for this population was 18%. While the response rate is low, there was a sufficient number of responses to insure that the sample is representative.

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[2] Copies of the most recent survey instruments will be provided upon request.

[3] Approximately five years ago, this set of relevant dimensions was developed for an undergraduate admissions research project. The development of this set of twenty-seven items was a collaborative effort among members of the institutional research staff and the office of undergraduate admissions.

FIGURE 1

For this section, rate each characteristic as it applies to Tufts. Check the appropriate box.

		Very 5	Moderately 4	Neither 3	Moderately 2	Very 1	
a.	Urban						Rural
b.	Fun						A Grind
c.	Expensive						Inexpensive
d.	Limited Academic Program						Diverse Academic Program
e.	Large						Small
f.	Traditional						Innovative
g.	Conservative						Liberal
h.	Personal						Impersonal
i.	Academically Rigorous						Academically Easy
j.	Relaxed						High Pressure
k.	Faculty Teaching						Graduate Student Teaching
l.	Diverse						Homogeneous
m.	Provincial						International
n.	Spirited						Apathetic
o.	Undergraduate Emphasis						Graduate Emphasis
p.	Strong Reputation						Weak Reputation
q.	Wide Social Options						Limited Social Options
r.	Elitist						Egalitarian
s.	Underrated						Overrated
t.	Cutthroat						Noncompetitive
u.	Average						Excellent
v.	Preprofessional						Liberal Arts Emphasis
w.	Selective						Nonselective
x.	Research Oriented						Not Research Oriented
y.	Safe						Unsafe
z.	Wide Cultural Options						Limited Cultural Options
aa.	Open Curriculum						Structured Curriculum

Senior Survey. In the spring of 1991, questionnaires were administered to members of the Class of 1991 to gather information regarding students immediate post-baccalaureate plans. In addition, seniors were queried to ascertain the following: (1) their long-term educational goals, (2) factors which are important in career choice, (3) degree satisfaction with undergraduate programs and services provided by the university, (4) an evaluation of the abilities and skills that may have been developed in their bachelor's degree program, and (5) their perceptions of Tufts' image. Of the 1392 members of the class, 1321 responded to the survey. Thus, an overall response rate of 95% was realized.

Faculty and Administrators Survey. In January, 1992; a survey was sent to Tufts administrators and the faculty chairperson of each department in the College of Arts and Sciences. These individuals were asked to evaluate the current image of Tufts and to indicate their desired image of the university. Thirty-eight members of the faculty and administration returned the survey. Thus, yielding a 63% return. Unfortunately given the small size of the original population, the response was not sufficient to be representative of the population. [4]

Alumni Survey. In the fall of 1991, members of the Class of 1986 were queried to ascertain what had transpired in the five years since their undergraduate graduation. A vast amount of information was collected: (1) academic history, (2) an evaluation of their undergraduate experiences, (3) post-baccalaureate employment and volunteer activities, (4) an evaluation of abilities and skills that may have been developed in their bachelor's degree program, (5) factors which were important in making career choices and (6) their perceptions of Tufts' image. A response rate of 38% was realized.

FINDINGS

Desired vs Current Image. One of our primary motivation in conducting this project was to determine whether the desired image of the institution differed from that of the current image held by various constituents. In order to obtain a measure of "desired image", faculty and administrators were

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[4] If we were to do this again, we would expand the population to include more members of the faculty and not limit faculty responses to only chair persons of each department.

asked to give their idea of the desired image of Tufts. Their aggregated responses to this question provided the baseline from which to measure the differential between the desired and current image of the institution. A mean was calculated for each semantic differential by subgroup (incoming freshmen, current students, graduating seniors, alumni, faculty & administration, desired image). These means are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Semantic Differential		Incoming Freshmen	Current Students	Graduating Seniors	Alumni	Faculty Administration	Desired Image	Total
a. 5. Urban	Rural .1	3.88	3.79	3.81	3.90	3.84	3.61	3.84
b. 5. Fun	A Grind .1	4.00	3.48	3.54	3.81	3.59	3.33	3.69
c. 5. Expensive	Inexpensive .1	4.80	4.93	4.92	4.88	4.74	3.59	4.88
d. 5. Limited Academics	Diverse Academics .1	1.46	2.61	2.60	2.05	2.03	1.50	2.21
e. 5. Large	Small .1	2.86	2.55	2.63	2.61	2.68	2.71	2.68
f. 5. Traditional	Innovative .1	2.54	2.73	2.98	2.81	2.75	2.06	2.81
g. 5. Conservative	Liberal .1	2.41	2.34	2.51	2.57	2.55	2.34	2.47
h. 5. Personal	Impersonal .1	4.02	3.50	3.29	3.48	3.65	4.06	3.54
i. 5. Academically Rigorous	Easy .1	4.45	4.04	3.63	3.82	3.53	4.06	3.92
j. 5. Relaxed	High Pressure.1	2.84	2.71	2.64	2.76	3.11	2.81	2.72
k. 5. Faculty Teaching	Grad Student .1	4.12	4.32	4.24	4.24	4.53	4.63	4.22
l. 5. Diverse	Homogenous .1	4.33	3.48	3.08	3.17	2.87	4.03	3.47
m. 5. Provincial	International .1	2.00	2.20	2.74	2.42	2.13	1.84	2.43
n. 5. Spirited	Apathetic .1	4.12	2.54	2.35	2.92	2.86	3.94	2.93
o. 5. Undergraduate Emphasis	Graduate Emphasis .1	3.92	3.78	3.75	3.54	3.76	3.75	3.77
p. 5. Strong Reputation	Weak Reputation .1	4.62	3.87	3.98	4.27	3.89	4.65	4.18
q. 5. Wide Social Options	Limited Social Options .1	4.40	2.69	2.68	3.37	2.92	3.80	3.24
r. 5. Elitist	Egalitarian .1	2.92	3.53	3.71	3.57	3.72	2.57	3.47
s. 5. Underrated	Overrated .1	3.35	3.28	2.93	3.20	3.24	3.04	3.12
t. 5. Cutthroat	Noncompetitive .1	3.41	3.17	3.50	3.43	3.14	2.97	3.42
u. 5. Average	Excellent .1	1.50	2.28	2.48	2.10	2.19	1.29	2.14
v. 5. Preprofessional	Liberal Arts Emphasis .1	2.32	2.24	2.41	2.49	2.62	2.25	2.38
w. 5. Selective	Nonselective .1	4.42	3.88	3.92	3.99	3.95	4.55	4.06
x. 5. Research Oriented	Not Research Oriented .1	3.45	3.13	2.99	2.86	3.26	3.58	3.11
y. 5. Safe	Unsafe .1	4.09	3.93	3.52	3.65	3.95	4.65	3.74
z. 5. Wide Cultural Options	Limited Cultural Options .1	4.51	3.66	3.43	3.66	3.50	4.34	3.78
aa. 5. Open Curriculum	Structured Curriculum .1	3.53	2.47	2.87	3.12	2.61	2.97	3.03

An analysis of difference of the mean scores of the total population's current image and the desired image indicates that while differences do exist between the current image and the

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desired image they appear to parallel each other (Figure 2). The differences appear to be in the magnitude of the image. The desired image tends toward the extremes. For instance, Tufts is currently viewed as having moderately diverse academics, a relatively strong reputation, being selective, having a focus on faculty teaching, and being more international than provincial. The desired image for the institution is to be more diverse academically, to have a stronger reputation, focus even more on faculty teaching, and to become more international. There were two areas where the current image and the desired image tend to lean toward opposite poles. The current perception of the institution is that it is somewhat "cutthroat" and "elitist". In contrast, the desired image would be for the institution to be more "non-competitive" and more "egalitarian". It appears that the respondents would like to see the institution create a more distinctive image.

Constituent Views. Our analyses indicate that perceptions do differ among the various constituencies. As one might expect the internal image of the institution varies from that of the external image (Figure 3). An analysis of variance was done for each semantic differential. [5] Most of those differences were between the incoming freshmen and one or more of the other groups. In general it can be said that the incoming freshmen held a rosier, more positive view of Tufts than the other groups did. For instance, freshmen had significant differences with all of the other groups on images such as the level of fun, expense, academic diversity and size. The incoming freshmen view on the institution was that it was more fun, less expensive [6], had more diverse academic programs, and was larger.

The differences between incoming freshmen and other groups is further illustrated if we examine the differences between graduating seniors and the accepted applicants (Figure 4). In terms of students life, graduating seniors perceive the institution as less fun, less spirited, and more cutthroat and with fewer cultural options than incoming freshmen. In addition, with regard to the academic environment,

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[5] Each one-way anova was found to have a p level of .05 or less.

[6] The only population that perceived the institution as less expensive than incoming freshmen were the faculty and administrators.

FIGURE 2

DESIRED VS CURRENT IMAGE

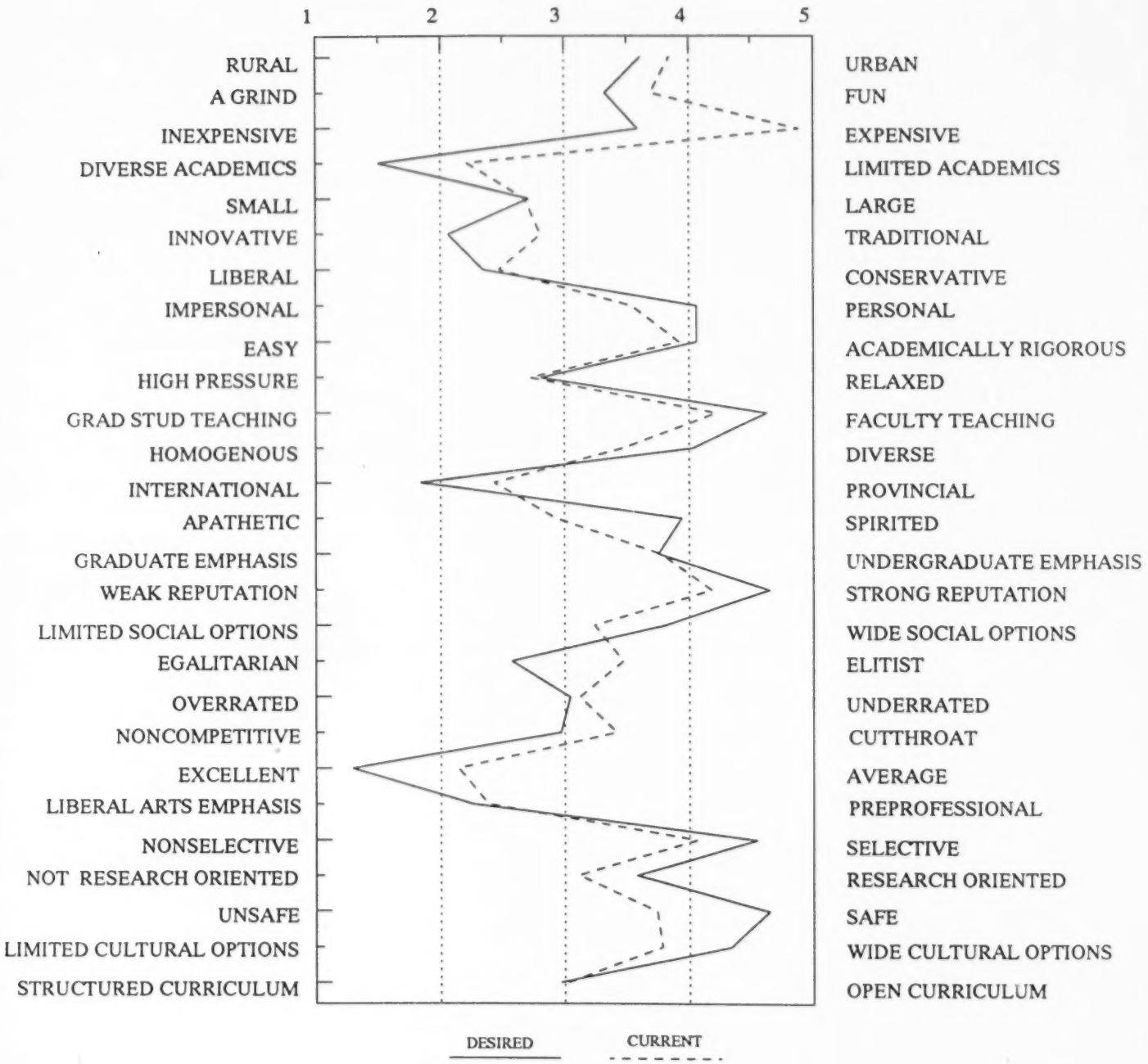
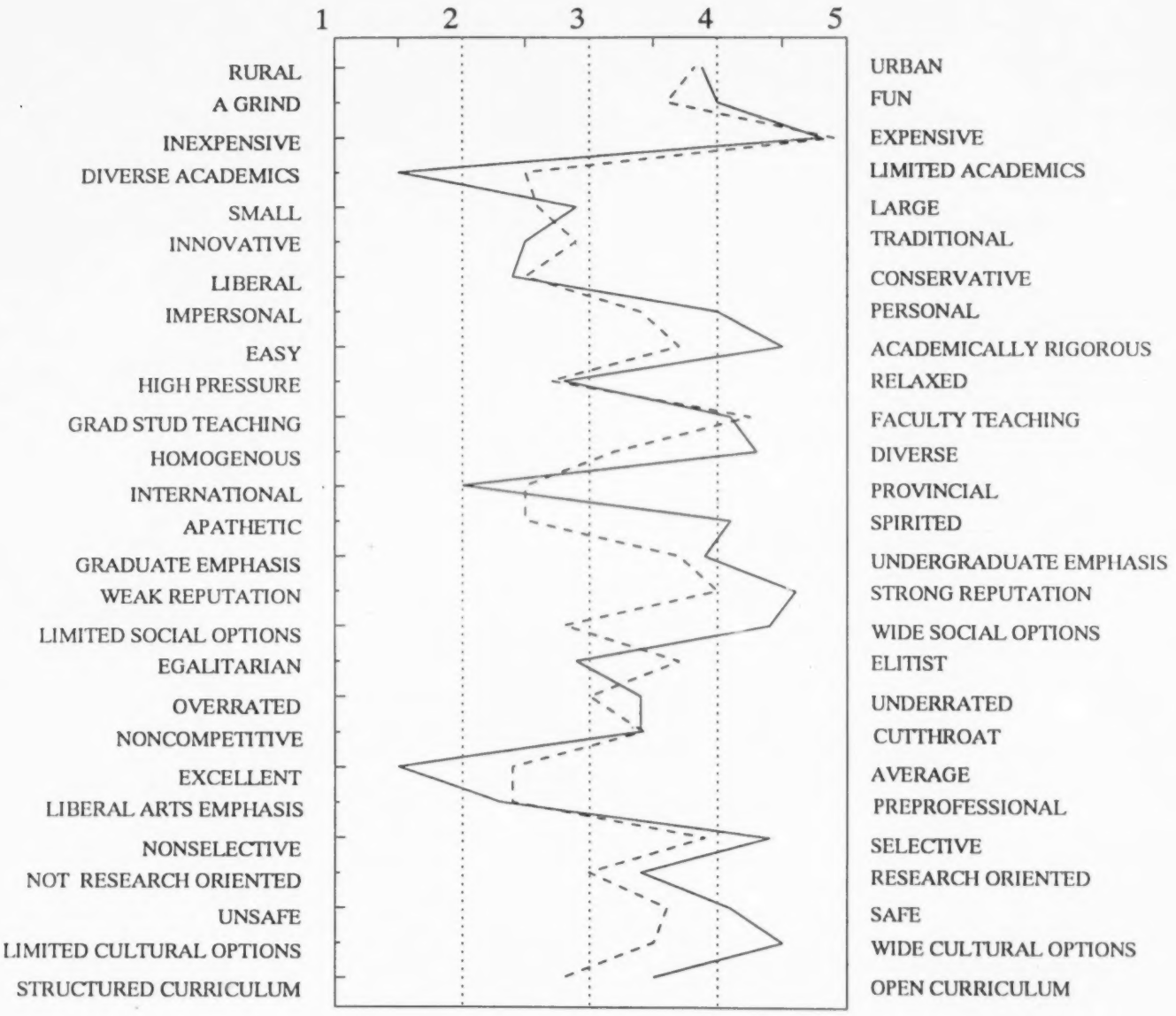


FIGURE 3

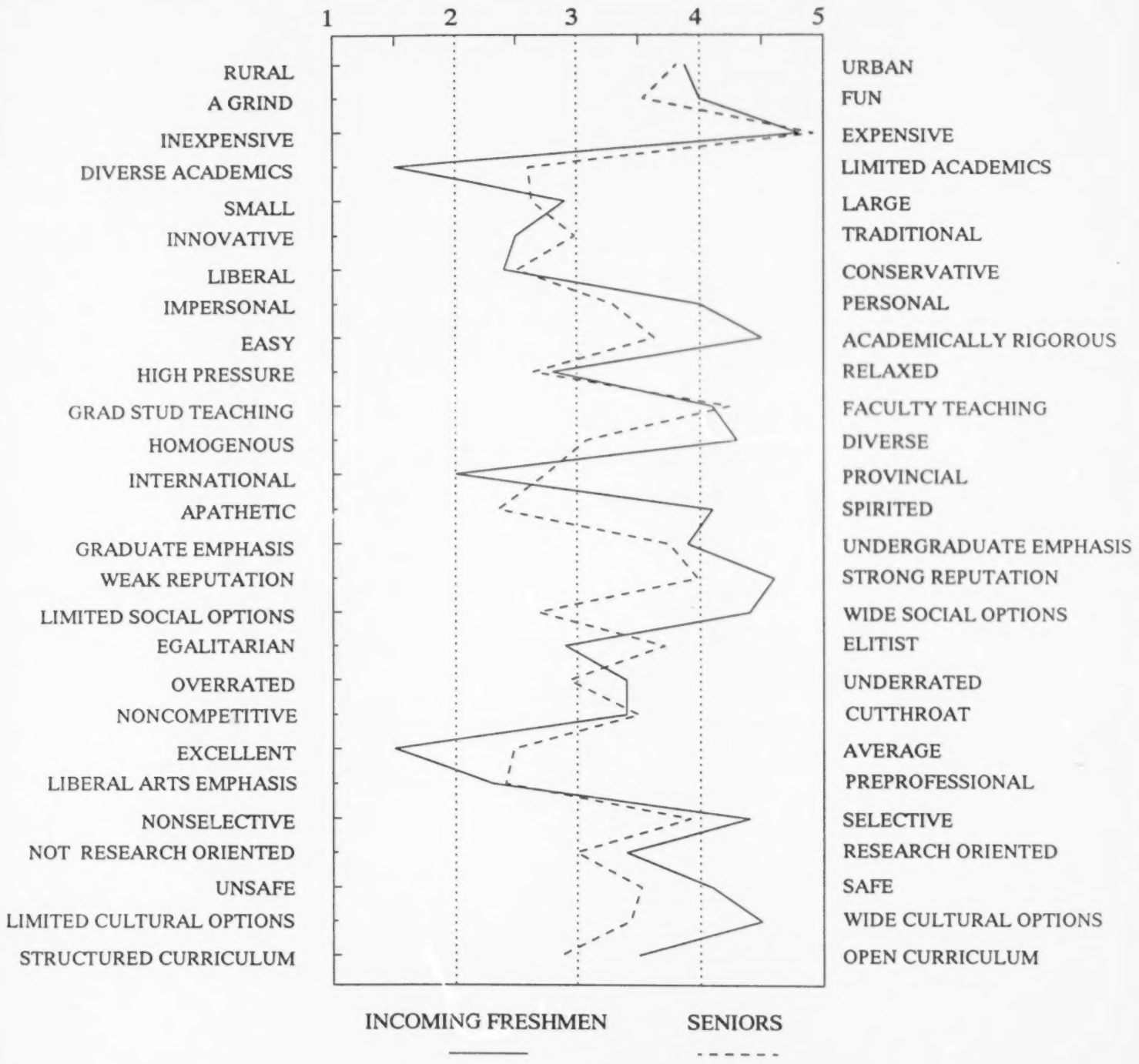
INCOMING FRESHMEN VS ALL OTHER POPULATIONS



INCOMING FRESHMEN ——— ALL OTHERS - - - - -

FIGURE 4

INCOMING FRESHMEN VS GRADUATING SENIORS



seniors found the institution to have more faculty teaching, to be less underrated, and to be less research oriented than the incoming population.

Another question that we were interested in pursuing was whether alumni view the institution differently than currently enrolled students. We compared the responses of alumni with the aggregated responses of graduating seniors, juniors, and sophomores (Figure 5). The image of the university held by alumni and currently enrolled students was quite similar. There were only a few dimensions where their perceptions differed. For example, alumni perceived the university as being more fun, having a more diverse academic program, being more international, and having wider cultural and social options, and having a stronger reputation.

Five Image Factors. In an attempt to collapse the twenty-seven variables into categories, five factors were extracted using the varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. Following are the five factors:

Factor 1 - **The Spirit and Temperament** factor includes images b, d, h, i, l, n, p, q, r, s, u, w, y, and z. These are the dimensions that include such areas as safety, selectivity, egalitarianism, and homogeneity.

Factor 2 - The **Curriculum** factor includes images f, g,l, m, t, z, and aa. These are the dimensions that include innovation, curricular structure, and an international perspective.

Factor 3 - The **Competitiveness** factor includes image differentials i, j, t, and w. The differentials included in this factor are academic rigor, pressure, competitiveness, and selectivity.

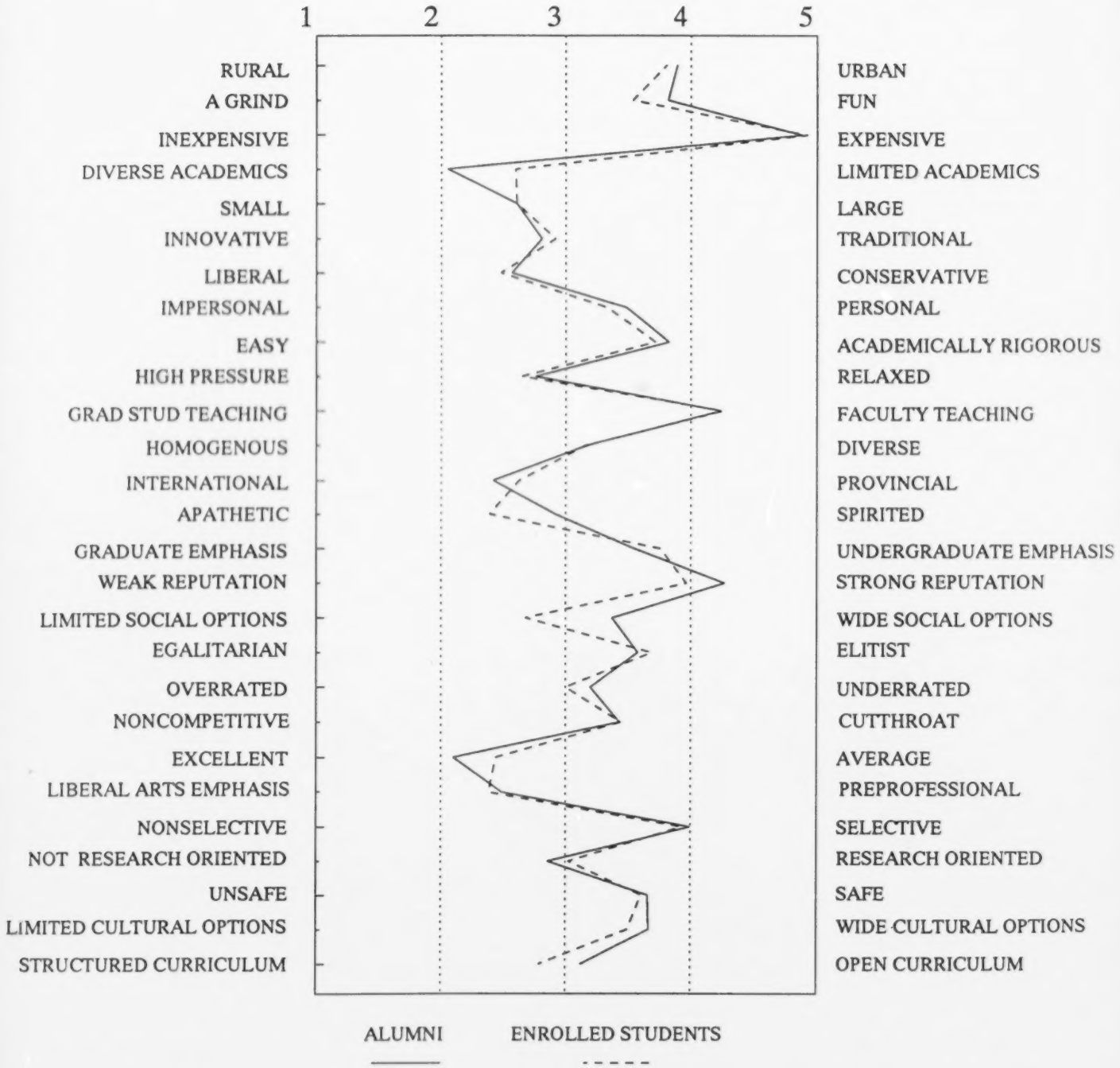
Factor 4 - The **Academic Life** factor includes four image differentials (k, o, v, and x). These differentials include such things as teaching orientation (faculty vs graduate students), areas of emphasis (undergraduate vs graduate and liberal arts vs preprofessional) and research orientation.

Factor 5 - The **Demographics** factor includes two image differentials: setting (urban vs rural) and size (large vs small).

We used these factors as dependent variables to compare the five different constituent groups. Analyses of variance were run among the five groups to determine any significant differences. Differences were observed between at least two groups on each of the five factors. As with the previous

FIGURE 5

ALUMNI VS ENROLLED STUDENTS



analysis, it was usually the matriculating accepted applicants who were different in that they saw the university in a more idealistic light than the other groups.

Significant group differences were found in their perceptions of the spirit and temperament of the institution. Incoming freshmen and graduating seniors' views were significantly different from all other groups. As stated previously, freshmen and graduating seniors' perceptions of the image also differed from each other. There were no significant differences between the perceptions of current students and faculty/administrators and the perceptions of alumni and faculty/administrators. With regard to the curriculum factor, incoming freshmen differed from all the other groups. They viewed the institution to be somewhat liberal, moderately innovative, somewhat competitive, having wide cultural options and an open curriculum. In addition, current students perceptions of the curriculum differed from those of graduating seniors. Sophomores and juniors perceived Tufts to be more innovative, more liberal, more diverse, more international, less cutthroat, having wider cultural options, and having a more structured curriculum than the graduating seniors.

There were no significant differences between seniors and current students in terms of the competitiveness factor. However, graduating seniors' perceptions of competitiveness were significantly different from those of alumni, incoming freshmen, and faculty. Graduating seniors found Tufts to be more competitive than the other groups.

Incoming freshmen were again set apart from the other groups with respect to their perceptions of academic life at Tufts. They viewed the institution as having less faculty teaching emphasis, stronger undergraduate emphasis, stronger leaning towards a liberal arts emphasis, and more research oriented. There were no significant differences between the other groups.

Lastly, on the demographic factor, incoming freshmen and current students perceptions differed with those of three different groups. There were significant differences between the freshmen and the current student, graduating senior and faculty/administrator groups. Freshmen perceived the campus to be more urban and larger than the other populations. The current student group was significantly

different from the freshmen, graduating senior and alumni groups. Current students viewed the campus as more rural and smaller than the other groups.

DISCUSSION

One of the most striking findings of this research is that incoming freshmen held a significantly different view of the institution than the other constituents. If one believes that freshmen perceptions are unrealistic, there exist the strong possibility that students will be dissatisfied once they matriculate and discover that the university is not what they expected. In Tinto's research on persistence, he points out that large differences between expectations and reality result in great dissatisfaction and discontentment which in turn increase the probability of students withdrawing from the institution (Tinto, 1987). Thus, it would be in an institution's best interest to examine in greater detail the specific areas where incoming freshmen's perceptions are significantly different from those of reality. In order to insure more congruence between reality and image, the institution would then need to work on ways to insure that the image accurately reflects the institution or to work on was to improve the current image.

After completing a project such as this it is always useful to reflect on ways in which the research can be improved and to make recommendations for future research. While the semantic differentials that were created for this project are not absolute concrete measures of abstract concepts, we believe that they are a reasonable reflection of Tufts' image. Moreover, repeated use of these measures over several years has yielded consistent results. The most problematic aspect of this project was the inconsistent response rates of our five constituent groups. As was mentioned previously, the sample of faculty and administrators was not representative of the entire population. Thus, our current measure of desired institutional image may not be an accurate reflection of the "true" desired image.

For those interested in replicating this research, it would be extremely beneficial to work with a varied group of individuals at your institution to develop a set of semantic differentials that reflect your particular institution. In addition working diligently to obtain truly random and equal samples of various constituent populations should prove to be worthwhile.

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ABSTRACT

An organization's image is not a clear, concise concept; but rather a set of individual's perceptions about the institution. An educational institution has a multi-faceted image that includes academic, social, political and perhaps stylistic dimensions. We discuss the use of the semantic differential research tool to investigate one institution's image. Specifically, we explore the following questions: (1) What are the differences between the institution's desired image and current image? (2) Do various constituencies view the institution differently? If so, how do alumni perceptions differ from those of current students? Does the institution's internal image differ from its external image?